

Cheryl Blake Price, “Vegetable Monsters: Man-Eating Trees in *Fin-de-Siècle* Fiction.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41 (2013): 311–327.

In this comparative piece, Cheryl Blake Price traces the history of the carnivorous plant trope in the nineteenth century “from passive poisoners [to] active carnivores” (311) before exploring the different uses of man-eating plants in two examples of British Imperial Gothic fiction at the *fin-de-siècle*. Blake Price discusses the role of man-eating plants in Phil Robinson’s “The Man-Eating Tree” (1882) and Frank Aubrey’s *The Devil-Tree of El Dorado* (1897), elaborating on their seemingly paradoxical position as both representatives of a colonial other to be feared, and also as a gothic double for the British protagonist or the British Empire itself. She places this work in the wider context of Simon Estok’s call to investigate ‘ecophobia’ in literature, analysing the presentation of nature in the *fin-de-siècle* moment of British Imperial Gothic.

Blake Price begins with the myth of the Javanese upas and its influence on earlier nineteenth-century writing, before demonstrating the impact of Darwin’s writings on evolution and *Insectivorous Plants* (1875) on the representation of carnivorous plants towards the end of the century. She shows how these authors drew on ‘real’ accounts of man-eating trees and combined elements of these accounts with the conventions of gothic fiction and adventure writing. Arguing that man-eating plant stories form a sub-genre of late-Victorian gothic fiction, Blake Price extends Patrick Brantlinger’s definition of Imperial Gothic and goes on to suggest how the stories draw on imperial concerns regarding colonial influence, and fears provoked by Darwinian evolution and its implications for the natural world. The genre, she suggests, “is perhaps best defined by the anxieties that it engenders”; they are stories that “explore *fin-de-siècle* fears about evolutionary hybridity, aberrant nature, and colonial environments” (312), anxieties that expand “beyond fears of human degeneration to also highlight the threat of an unconquered and highly evolved natural world” (312-313) in which the plants function as a colonial ‘other’.

For Blake Price, Robinson’s and Aubrey’s use of man-eating trees demonstrates “the impact of imperial ambitions on the colonial environment” (313), but not in an anti-imperialist way. She places the stories within the context of narratives critiquing the empire’s practices without objecting to its “overall mission” (320). The trees, for example, are themselves vampiric, focused on greedy consumption and always hungry, and as such, they double for an expanding and overreaching empire. Thus, she suggests, the authors express a fear *for* the native environment as well as *of* its appetite. The trees come to represent the “darkest aspects of humanity” (319) and, in the case of Robinson’s protagonist, they serve as a gothic double for the British hero. However, the protagonists’ relationship to the ‘natives’, Blake Price argues, is not questioned: modifications to imperial rule are proposed, but in the form of better imperial administration of the colonies. Moreover, the article argues that these stories advocate a better understanding of colonial environments while also highlighting the fear of colonial influence. For example, the use of the ‘devil-tree’ as a form of psychological torture “taps into cultural ecophobia” (322), challenging the Victorian compulsion to collect and catalogue. For Aubrey, the lost civilization of the Manoans demonstrates the danger of overreaching imperial ambition and offers a warning to the British Empire, and Blake Price explores the ‘lost’, white civilization that Aubrey posits, with its history of empire and naval

power, as menaced by a savage Dark Brotherhood and an imported, colonial, devil-tree. While suggesting that the plants in these stories serve similar functions, she draws attention to key differences: where Robinson's tree is Darwinian, Aubrey's is an "aberration of nature" (323). The article concludes that, just as gothic doubling permeates these stories, they also encode a double fear, that of the dangers of colonial environments, alongside the fear of the possibility of losing them altogether. Such fears are key components of the Imperial Gothic, leading Blake Price to argue convincingly for the vital role that analysis of the genre has to play in the field of ecocriticism.

Overall, the article's insightful examination of the tropes connected with nature in these examples of British Imperial Gothic *fin-de-siècle* fiction provides an excellent contribution to the growing study of ecophobia in literature, anticipating the trajectory of future ecocritical readings of British Gothic writing, and other genres and periods. Blake Price answers Tom Hillard's call to explore ecophobia and the Gothic, and builds on his suggestion that the Gothic mode of fiction and its dealings with fear gives us a better understanding of such fears. The in-depth discussion of these two pieces makes a convincing argument for the importance of such work and of the prevalence of these tropes in *fin-de-siècle* writing.

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